23: Paul G-5 (ca. 1951) 1952 FJ23 Shilluk FJ23

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[TITLE PAGE]

23: Paul G-5 (ca. 1951) 1952 FJ23 Shilluk FJ23

NOTES

THE MAR OF THE SHILLUK

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IT is related in Shilluk legend that when Nyidwai, the sister of Nyikang, the divine founder of the Shilluk royal line, married a chief of the Nuba the bridegroom presented Nyikang with a silver engraved stool and a mysterious object of great supernatural powers known as the *Mar*.

It has been described variously as a crystal, as a stone having form but no weight, and as a pot containing magic water, but as it is some two hundred and fifty years since it was last seen, accurate description is hardly to be expected.

So long as the *Mar* was in Shilluk hands the tribe was great and powerful: cattle increased, there was always enough to eat, and the tribe was invincible in war. In the reign of *Reth* Dokot (A.D. 1670-90), however, even the warrior Shilluk had had their fill of battle and bloodshed, so that they finally refused to accompany that warlike but uneven-tempered ruler on yet another expedition against their neighbours, complaining with reason that his continual campaigns allowed them no time to gather in their harvests and look after their families.

This so incensed the *Reth* that in a fit of pique he threw the *Mar* into the Nile, whence it has never been recovered. The Shilluk like to consider that with it went the luck of the tribe, and that they have never been happy or prosperous since.

The object of this note is to suggest that the *Mar* may in fact have been an emerald, a peridot, an olivine, or some such similar stone. Up to the beginning of the sixteenth century, when Pizarro conquered Peru, the only emerald mines known to the world were those in the eastern deserts of Egypt and the Sudan, the most famous being that at J. Zabara, near the coast not far north of the ancient port of Bernice.

Quatremere, quoting from Masudi's description of the mines in *Muruj al Dhahab*, states that the emeralds mined there were of four qualities.[1] The poorest quality, known as *Asam*, was brittle, of bad colour, and little value. A less inferior type was traded in Egyptian markets to buyers from the west, and yet finer stones, called *Al Bahri*, were much in demand by the "Kings of the Sea," from Hindustan, China and the Hadramaut. The finest specimens

[1] *Memoires Geographiques et Historiques sur l'Egypte.* See also Floyer: *Etudes sur le Nord Etbai.*

23: Paul G-5 (ca. 1951) 1952 FJ23 Shilluk FJ23

174 of all, pure in colour, of great brilliancy, without flaw or blemish, were but rarely found, and for that reason most highly treasured. They were called *Mar*.

The paths of comparative philology, as pointed out in Vol. XXI, Part I, of this journal, abound in pitfalls for the credulous and unwary, nevertheless, it is tempting to suppose that the luck of the Shilluk, of which *Reth* Dokot so inconsiderately deprived them, was in fact a comparatively rare type of emerald from the Red Sea hills.